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AUTHOR Thonus, Terese
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ABSTRACT

A study compared the language of interactions of teachers with students who are native speakers (NSs) and non-native speakers (NNSs) of English in academic writing tutorial sessions. Data were gathered through discourse analysis of transcripts of 12 tutorials and interviews with the participants. Analysis of talk examined topic initiation, directive and mitigation type and frequency, and negotiation of acceptances and rejections of suggestions and evaluations. Also investigated were volubility, overlaps, backchannels, and laughter. Results indicate that tutors were less conversationally involved with their NSS students than with their NS students, and their behavior was more variable with NNSs, suggesting that tutors have yet to discover adequate "frames" for interactions with NNSs. NNS student expected their tutors to behave as higher-status interlocutors, and interpreted tutor behaviors such as volubility, directive frequency, and forcefulness as consistent with their constructions of tutors as a type of teacher with inherent rights to such behavior. In contrast, tutors were largely critical of their own behavior and of their students' expectations that they behave authoritatively. (Contains 16 references.) (MSE)

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NS-NNS Interaction in Academic Writing Tutorials: Discourse Analysis and Its Interpretations

Terese Thonus, East Carolina University

AAAL '99, Stamford CT

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Abstract

This study investigates academic writing tutorials in order to characterize NS-NNS interactions between tutor and tutee. A hybrid methodology was employed, combining discourse analysis of transcripts of twelve tutorials with participant interpretations gleaned through interviews.

Analysis of talk examined topic initiation, directive and mitigation type and frequency, and negotiation of acceptances and rejections of suggestions and evaluations. Also investigated were volubility, overlaps, backchannels, and laughter. According to all measures, tutors were less conversationally involved with their NNS than with their NS tutees. In addition, their behavior with NNS tutees was more variable than with NS tutees, suggesting that tutors have yet to discover adequate "frames" for interactions with NNSs.

In contrast to infrequent references by either tutors or tutees to NNS language proficiency in tutorial talk, participant interviews proved a rich source of information regarding interpretations of its effects on interaction. NNS tutees expected their tutors to behave as higher-status interlocutors, corroborating the finding that negotiations of status and of status-congruent behaviors were noticeably absent in NNS tutorials. Consistent with norms of positive politeness, NNSs interpreted tutor behaviors, particularly volubility and directive frequency and forcefulness, as consistent with their constructions of tutors as "a type of teacher" with inherent rights to such behavior. Tutors, in contrast, were largely critical of their own behavior and of their tutees' expectations that they behave authoritatively, consistent with norms of negative politeness.

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The combination of oral discourse analysis and participant interpretation, it is argued, yields more reliable data than either methodology does separately and should become standard in the characterization of NS-NNS interaction in its myriad settings.

NS-NNS Interaction in Academic Writing Tutorials: Discourse Analysis and Its Interpretations

Terese Thonus

Introduction

This study investigates academic writing tutorials in order to characterize NS-NNS interactions between tutor and tutee. A hybrid methodology, interactional sociolinguistics (Schiffrin, 1996), combines discourse analysis of transcripts of twelve tutorials with participant interpretations. I argue that discourse/conversation analysis of tutorial transcripts coupled with interview data, and, conversely, the examination of transcripts for correlates of categories nominated by tutors and tutees, provides a more adequate description of NS-NNS interactions than any single method.

As the most basic, natural, "unmarked" communicative genre, conversation tests the limits of linguistic analysis in examining the interface between language and nonlinguistic social structures and processes. However, communicative competence in interaction is not easily accessible through individual introspection. Rather, the meaningfulness of conversation depends on the interaction of and interpretations of two or more speakers.

Particularly problematic in the analysis of interaction is the notion of intersubjectivity, the assumption that "speaker and hearer see a conversation in the same way: they see the same stretches of behavior as questions, or repairs, or promises, or embedded noun clauses, or face-threatening acts" (Taylor & Cameron, 1987, p. 161). In conversation analysis, intersubjectivity is built up by and displayed in interactional sequences. What the conversational participants *tell* the analyst about what they said is inadmissible to the analysis; what they *said* and the sequences it occurred in are all that the researcher needs to observe to form a coherent interpretation. In contrast, in the ethnography of speaking, members' accounts and explanations of what they are "doing

and meaning," arrived at through playback (Fiksdal, 1990) and participant retrospection (Hartford & Bardovi-Harlig, 1992; Spencer-Oatey, 1993), is key to adequate interpretation (Duranti, 1988; Taylor & Cameron, 1987).

Schiffrin (1996) proposed a methodology that combined the best of conversation analysis and ethnographic techniques and attempts to deal with the problem of intersubjectivity. Interactional sociolinguistics, "the study of the linguistic and social construction of interaction," provides "a framework within which to analyze social context and to incorporate participants' own understanding of context into the inferencing of meaning" (Schiffrin, 1996, p. 316). Because it links collection of naturalistic data with narrowness of transcription and attention to details of the interaction, and checks of the analyst's interpretations with the participants themselves, interactional sociolinguistics is ideally suited to NS-NNS interaction research, in which multiple contexts of analysis must be considered.

One study of NS-NNS interaction in the academic writing center combined discourse analysis and interview data, with interesting results. In her 1992 dissertation, Virginia Young videotaped 19 NS-NS and NS-NNS tutorials and then interviewed each participant. Her research goals included detecting (a) whether "comfortable" or "uncomfortable moments" in tutorials could be correlated with tutor and student use of politeness strategies, and (b) which politeness strategies were successful with Asian tutees. She discovered that NNSs wanted their tutors to be "wise, professional, and distant," commensurate with their cultural preference for deference politeness. These students favored bald-on-record speech acts, including unmitigated imperatives, from their tutors instead of the indirect, mitigated suggestions characteristic of the solidarity politeness valued in American culture. The NNS tutees expressed a strong aversion to such expressions, which they said confused them and cast doubt on the credibility of tutor comments.

I selected Young's research as a model for this study because (a) she included NNSs among her participants, (b) made language proficiency an analytic and explanatory category, and (c) elicited participant interpretations of tutorial interactions.

The Study

Participants

Student participants in the study were six NS and six NNS undergraduate students enrolled at Indiana University during the spring and summer terms of 1997. As in Young's sample, all of the NNSs were Asian. This table identifies the tutors and the NNSs in the study according to gender (M = male; F = female) and age, and tutees according to gender, age, and of course, language proficiency. Tutor area of primary expertise and tutee paper content area are specified for each tutorial. Also reported are whether the tutorial was a first time visit to WTS or whether the tutorial represented a repeat visit to a tutor with whom the tutee had previously worked.

(1)
Participant Information

Tutorial	Total Time (Min.)	Tutor Gender and Age	Tutee Gender, Lang. Prof., & Age	Tutor Area of Primary Expertise	Tutee Paper Content Area	First Time Visit?	Repeat Visit with Same Tutor?
D	57	F (37)	NNSM (20)	English (lit.)	English (comp.)	no	no
E	59	F (32)	NNSF (20)	English (lit.)	English (comp.)	no	yes
H	57	F (34)	NNSF (22)	English (lit.)	English (lit.)	no	yes
I	55	F (22)	NNSF (21)	Sociology	Rel. Studies	no	yes
J	38	F (26)	NNSM (27)	Comp. Lit.	English (comp.)	yes	no
K	50	M (28)	NNSF (25)	English (lit.)	English (comp.)	yes	no

Procedure

I taped the tutorials and collected the student assignment sheets, papers, and tutor records as supporting documentation. After transcribing each tutorial, I scheduled initial interviews with tutors and students (separately), during which tapes and transcripts were available for playback. While listening to the interview tapes, I prepared detailed notes including selected quotes from participants. I then scheduled follow-up interviews that served as member checks. Participants read through the notes of the first interview and made comments clarifying or correcting information. Among other tasks, I asked them to rank a set of tutor directives in terms of forcefulness.

Results: Analysis of Talk

As shown in (2), analysis of talk examined topic initiation, directive and mitigation type and frequency, and negotiation of acceptances and rejections of suggestions and evaluations. Also investigated were volubility, overlaps, backchannels, and laughter.

(2)

Categories of Analysis

- Discourse phases
- Volubility
- Overlaps
- Backchannels
- Laughter
- Directive frequency
- Directive type
- Mitigation frequency
- Mitigation strategy
- Negotiation of evaluations and suggestions

Results are summarized in (3). According to all measures, tutors were less conversationally involved with their NNS than with their NS tutees. In addition, their behavior with NNS tutees was more variable than with NS tutees. Tutorials with NNSs were on average shorter and evidenced fewer turns, fewer topics, and shorter and more variable diagnosis phase length. Tutors interacting with NNSs exhibited greater volubility, more variability in directive frequency, and indirect and second-person modal directives, but fewer overlaps, less laughter, fewer imperative and first-person directives, and less mitigation, multiple mitigation, and variability in mitigation strategy. The greater consistency of tutor behaviors in interactions with NSs and variability in interactions with NNSs indicates that tutors have not yet discovered adequate "frames" (Briggs, 1991) or "ideal texts" (Roswell, 1992) for such tutorials, in part because NNS tutees are not contributing in the same way as their NS peers. In addition, relatively lower frequency of tutor interactional features and lower incidence of mitigation suggests that tutors (a) exhibited less conversational involvement with their NNS tutees and (b) showed less concern for NNS students' "face." These results are consistent with those of my previous studies of tutorials (Thonus, 1995; 1998a, b; in press).

(3)

Results

Tutorials with NNSs were shorter than those with NSs and evidenced:

- fewer turns
- fewer topics
- shorter and more variable diagnosis phase length

Tutors interacting with NNSs exhibited:

- greater volubility
- more variability in directive frequency/ indirect and second-person modal directives

but

- fewer overlaps

- less laughter
- fewer imperative and first-person directives
- less mitigation, multiple mitigation, and variability in mitigation strategy.

For purposes of illustration, I will focus on results in two categories, volubility, and directive type and frequency.

Volubility. As shown in (4), tutors were considerably more voluble, or talkative, with NNS tutees (compare the ratio 1.9 with 1.3 in NS tutorials). Volubility ratios of 2.7, 2.6, and 2.3 in Tutorials D, E, and K, respectively, are responsible for the conspicuous gap between volubility rates in NS and NNS tutorials. The only tutorial to fall below the overall mean was Tutorial I, with its ratio of tutor to student words of 1.2.

(4)

Volubility in NS and NNS Tutorials

Group	Mean Time	Mean Turns	Mean T Words (per min.)	Mean S Words (per min.)	Mean T Words (per turn)	Mean S Words (per turn)	Ratio of T: S Words
NSs	55	150	76	58	28	21	1.3
NNSs	53	110	69	36	33	17	1.9
Mean	**54**	**123**	**73**	**48**	**31**	**20**	**1.5**

Directive frequency. As shown in (5), frequency of tutor directives in tutorials with NS and NNS students was remarkably similar (0.49 and 0.52 per turn, respectively). However, the disparity between the least frequent and most frequent users in NNS tutorials, however, was more marked: TE produced 0.31 directives per turn and TH 0.89 per turn. In this category as in others, tutors showed greater variability in their interactions with NNS as compared to NS tutees.

(5)

Frequency of Tutor Directives in NS and NNS Tutorials

Group	Turns	Directives	Directives/ Turn
NS Tutorials	900	441	0.49
NNS Tutorials	662	343	0.52
Overall Mean	**1562**	**784**	**0.50**

Directive type. The directive typology used in this study is based on a system of directness-graded "request strategies" (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), as shown in (6). Combined with mitigation, these produced a ten-point scale from mitigated indirect (less direct) to unmitigated imperative (more direct) directives.

(6)

Directive Types

1. Indirect (Mitigated): Tutorial F, Turn 195
   Maybe the thesis doesn't have to say everything changed one way or the other.
2. Indirect (Unmitigated): Tutorial H, Turn 80
   And when you're unsure about idioms that's a good place to look..
3. Interrogative (M): Tutorial E, Turn 101
   Is there like some general way you could just say what, what does that, this essay describes?
4. Interrogative (U): Tutorial B, Turn 25
   And then are you going to have examples (.) of how this script works?
5. 1p Modal (M): Tutorial C, Turn 48
   Um (.) if you decide to use this quote, I would suggest that you lop it off.
6. 1p Modal (U): Tutorial J, Turn 90
   So I would go with that as well.
7. 2p Modal (M): Tutorial A, Turn 81
   I was just wondering if maybe you just want to make thus um a statement rather than a question, just so you can be a little more directive with um (.) your gentle reader.
8. 2p Modal (U): Tutorial D, Turn 35
   You need to talk about the intro before you get into the, into the thesis.
9. Imperative (M): Tutorial G, Turn 30
   So, and then, you know, in some way just to sort of like remind us.
10. Imperative (U): Tutorial L, Turn 157
    So think about that when you're writing your introduction.

Results of the study showed that NNS tutees received proportionately more indirect and second-person modal directives than their NS counterparts. The difference between tutor use of second-person modals was 30% in NS tutorials and 44% in NNS tutorials. Use of imperatives was 34% and 23%, respectively. Whereas imperative self-suggestions may have encoded descriptions of future student activities, second-person modals may have been attempts at enhanced indirection and mitigation.

Towards a Characterization of NNS Tutorials

Analysis of talk in tutorial transcripts yields results that support the notion that writing center interactions between NSs and NNSs differ both qualitatively and quantitatively. In contrast to infrequent references by either tutors or tutees to NNS language proficiency in tutorial talk, participant interviews proved a rich source of information regarding interpretations of its effects on interaction. Here, I present two linguistic phenomena for which such triangulated evidence proved invaluable in the interpretation of NS-NNS interaction: volubility, and directive frequency and forcefulness.

Volubility

SD classified his own volubility as "average." "Of course" TD was more voluble because she was answering the questions he asked of her. TH criticized her own high volubility however, although she believed it was occasioned by SH's low volubility and lack of coherence. For her part, SH said she expected TH to be more talkative because "she's explain about my paper." In keeping with his tutorial training, TK confessed to talking too much in the tutorial:

(7)

This student had already had instruction in a lot of this stuff. I would probably do less talking and let the student figure out what to ask and how to ask, figure out what she wanted or at least try to, and ask clarifying questions rather than assuming some of the times that I knew what she was saying. Oftentimes if I'm uncomfortable or uncertain about a situation, I'll fill in the gaps...It's more nervousness than anything else. (TK)

Despite her tutor's self-criticism, SK believed it was TK's job to be talkative because his role was to "give some advices." TI explained that she did not know enough about the subject matter to ask significant questions, and for this reason she found herself talking less than usual. SI agreed that TI was not particularly voluble, but she rated her own volubility at 9 on a 10-point scale because of all the explanation she had to do: "She asked a lot of questions and I answered a lot, but I was doing more explaining than anything else."

Such comments bolster Young's (1992) contention that NNSs may welcome tutor volubility. Whereas in western cultures lower volubility of the higher-status interlocutor may signal deference to the lower-status interlocutor and a movement towards solidarity and collaboration, in Asian cultures lower volubility may signal avoidance or lack of engagement on the part of the higher-status individual (Tannen, 1994). NNS student references to their tutors' volubility supported this notion: SD's comment that "of course" TD spoke more than he because she was answering the questions he asked of her, SH's and SK's assertions that tutor talkativeness was to be a positive quality, and SI's complaint that TI's many questions had required so much tutee explanation.

Ranking the Forcefulness of Directives

The methodology of interactional sociolinguistics was also useful in uncovering differing interpretations of the forcefulness of suggestions. Of 21 suggestions presented to and ranked by both tutor and NNS student, only 6 were (a) identified as suggestions by tutor and student and (b) ranked identically in terms of

"forcefulness." Three of the remaining 15 were not considered suggestions by one or the other participant, and four of the remaining 12 were ranked significantly differently (at least two ranks apart, e.g., 1 vs. 3). This table details each suggestion presented to participants during interviews and its "forcefulness ranking." Note that TD did not rank suggestions.

For purposes of illustration, I present data for one tutorial pair, SH and TH. The four directives they ranked, their classification, and the ranking by student and tutor, are summarized here:

(8)

Tutorial H	*Classification*	*S Rank*	*T Rank*
So that's a key idea you want to have in your thesis. Right?	2p Modal (M)	1	1
What you might think about is having a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph...	2p Modal (U)	---	2
Yeah, maybe just make it more specific...	Imperative (M)	---	3
So those are things that whatever you put in here is what you want to put in your paper.	Indirect (U)	2	4

When asked whether TH had offered her a lot of suggestions during the course of the tutorial, SH said she had received no more or no fewer than from any other tutor she had worked with. SH did not interpret all of the utterances in the task as suggestions. For example, she did not think the second, *What you might think about is having a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph*, was a suggestion because she "already knew this kind of stuff and was trying to do it that way." In her view, the third, *Yeah, maybe just make it more specific*, was also not a suggestion because TH was merely rephrasing her own self-suggestion (*Maybe I just need to change my thesis, right?*). SH ranked the first suggestion, the second-person modal *So that's a key idea you want to have in your thesis*, stronger than the last, the indirect *So those are things that whatever*

you put in here is what you want to put in your paper, because "It affect whole paper...This is for my whole paper." Interestingly, this interpretation of directive forcefulness as linked to the relevance of a suggestion to the student's entire paper versus only a specific part of it was cited by several other participants, including tutors TK and TI.

Citing *So that's a key idea you want to have in your thesis. Right?*, TH commented: "This is a fairly forceful statement. I want to be clear that she is on the right track and perhaps even make a note of what she has said." Concerning *What you might think about is having a topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph*, TH remarked that the statement was "somewhat emphatic" because this was the first time she had introduced the idea of using topic sentences as an organizational tool. TH did not view *Yeah, maybe just make it more specific* as "very forceful," concurring with SH's evaluation that it was not "really" a suggestion. Of the indirect suggestion *So those are things that whatever you put in here is what you want to put into your paper*, TH commented: "Sounds pretty vague! Sounds like I'm backing way off." However, her evaluation of this suggestion as weak contrasts with the emphatic >>> hand beats with which she delivered it. This may explain why SH interpreted it as a somewhat stronger directive.

An intriguing feature in the ranking of directives in the NNS tutorials was that tutees consistently interpreted forcefulness in other than linguistic terms. For example, SD labeled the directive in (9) "strong" because "She [TD] is right":

(9)

⇒ TD: But this paper is also a comparison paper [which means that **you need to [bring them**
SD: [uh-huh [uh-huh
TD: **together a little bit more and maybe set up um kind of a context for the**
SD: uh-huh
TD: **discussion** because you can't really compare things that are different, I mean
SD: uh-huh
TD: I look at um (.) I look at the words here, "the meaning," your, your first sentence here, "Both Shen and Naylor are having difficulties in learning the meanings of the word 'I' and 'nigger,' respectively, because these words have multiple meanings depending upon um the um context when these words are used."

(Tutorial D, Turn 13)

The interview data reveals that consistent with norms of positive politeness, NNSs constructed tutors as "a type of teacher" with inherent rights to volubility and directive forcefulness. Although TD admitted she saw no real difference between tutor-student roles in NS and NNS tutorials, she believed SD's view of her may have influenced the tutorial outcome, "which means that there's a greater respect and you don't want to interact as much." This statement substantiates Young's contention that NNSs prefer a more formal and "distant" relationship with their tutors. TJ, for example, found herself more "directive," with her NNS tutees, particularly when dealing with "grammar." With SJ, she felt like a "disciplinarian," "a teacher, forcing him to recite grammar rules," rather than helping him "realize how to correct the problem with minimal intervention." What TJ may have failed to notice is that such behavior was consciously elicited of her by her tutee.

Implications for Research Methodology

The triangulation possible in this design provided, as predicted, a more complete view of the tutorial interactions than either conversation analytic or ethnographic methods employed separately. The hybrid interactional sociolinguistic approach was shown to handle exceptionally well the issue of intent, which conversation analysis maintains can be intuited solely through analysis of talk, and which ethnographic methods argue can be gotten at only through participant interpretations. The problem of intersubjectivity displayed in dialogue dissonance in the analysis of talk and then in

conflicting interpretations in the interview data testify to the reality that conversational participants do not always know what the other means by what he or she says, and that interpretations of the same conversational events may radically differ. Interactional sociolinguistics emerges as a research method superior to either conversation analysis or ethnography alone and should become standard in the characterization of NS-NNS interaction in its myriad settings.

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